

# ON THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE ROYAL TOMBS IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY, AROUND THE SHRINE OF EDWARD THE CONFESSOR.\*

It is now about thirty-five years ago that I first went to Paris. Among the public buildings which I then visited, none interested me more than the Abbey Church of S. Denis, the crypts of which contain the ashes of most of the kings of France from Clovis downwards. Nothing could be more touching than the contemplation of the rifled tombs of such a line of powerful monarchs, arranged in decent order, but without any affected attempt at restoration, or incongruous endeavour to form an arbitrary system of perfect and uninterrupted classification.

In August last I again went to S. Denis with some friends, and there I saw that, without reference to periods, chronological arrangement, style, or any of the proprieties of art, a vain and pedantic effort had been at work to complete the series of the dynasties of the Valois and Bourbons, by the introduction of modern recumbent figures, stone coffins, and other sepulchral receptacles, devoid of taste and feeling. I felt how ill the "religio loci" had been attended to, and I left with the melancholy conviction that all the charm of truthfulness which had once given veneration to these vaults, had irrevocably passed away. It was under impressions such as these that I shortly after accompanied a foreign friend to Westminster Abbey, anxious to show him the memorials of our olden times and of our greatness in past periods, and that we possessed treasures, which would form a favourable contrast to those of S. Denis.

Westminster Abbey is emphatically the public building in England which most attracts the regard of the foreigner, filling him with respect, and producing the most lasting impression upon his imagination. I must own that I felt ashamed, as I drew the attention of my friend to monument after monument of our sovereigns, princes, and nobles, and particularly to the shrine of the Confessor. I endeavoured to palliate the state of ruin in which these precious memorials of the history of our country, its arts, and its greatness, were allowed to remain. From want of timely care they are gradually falling into decay, and threatening, in some cases, absolute destruction. "What!" said my companion, "can it be true that your Government so disregards these speaking monuments of past achievements, that it will not rescue them from utter ruin? What! is this father, the son of the Black Prince so disregarded by you, that you will not preserve, even as works of art, and ere it be too late, the marble that encases their remains, and the bronzes which hand down their lineaments? Have your Edwards and your Henrys bled for this? Have they for this perpetuated England's glory in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, and you allow them to be forgotten? Have these queens been in vain distinguished for their public and domestic virtues; in vain renowned for their piety, and you permit their sacred deposits to be despoiled, degraded, trampled upon?"

I could not disregard these too just reproaches. The full consciousness at once came home to me, that this interesting series of monuments had been shamefully neglected; that we were too ignorant of their value. Impressed by a sentiment which I feel assured that all partake, I mean by an earnest attachment for the monarchical, yet free institutions of our country, and an attachment to the throne, rendered still more ardent by the political convulsions which we have witnessed, I determined to bring the subject under the notice of this Institute, trusting, that however feeble would be the voice which should be heard pleading the cause of England's past worth, and of the dust of her honoured line of kings, a response would be found in the sympathy of those who would bear me. This spreading far and wide might eventually, perhaps, reach those who have the power, if they only have the will, to rescue from entire annihilation these speaking mementoes of monarchs,

who once ruled the destinies of this mighty people.

I venture, then, to claim attention as I take a rapid survey of the Sanctuary or Chapel of Edward the Confessor, and briefly notice the noble tombs by which the Shrine is surrounded. I must own that I can never enter without emotion and reverence this hallowed spot—this circle of royalty, which introduces one, as it were, into the awe-inspiring presence of a "royal fellowship of death;" of

"Monarchs the powerful and the strong,  
Famous in history and in song  
Of olden time."

(*Longfellow, Coplas de Manrique.*)

whose valour, whose virtues, whose sufferings, and whose piety afford so many touching lessons of the greatness, and at the same time of the weakness, of human nature.

In pursuing the description of the Chapel of Edward the Confessor, it will be well to follow the chronological order of the dates of the tombs. I must, therefore, remind you that Edward the Confessor, the last but one of the Saxon kings, after an eventful life, and a reign of twenty-four years, died in 1065-6. He had previously rebuilt the dilapidated old church of St. Peter, but being seized with sickness, he was prevented attending the consecration, and deceased a few days after it. Various miracles had been attributed to him during his lifetime, so that he was worshipped as a saint long before he was canonized. A first application to the Pope had been unsuccessful to get him placed on the Roman Calendar, but a second appeal to the papal throne was more propitious, and Alexander III. enjoined "that the body of the glorious king should be honoured here on earth as he himself was glorified in heaven." On the return of the messengers the remains of the sainted monarch were, in 1163, solemnly translated by Archbishop Becket into a new and precious Feretry, which had been prepared by Henry II. about ninety-nine years after the death of the sainted Edward.

When the choir and eastern division of the Abbey Church, which was then rebuilding, had been completed by Henry III. so as to admit of the celebration of divine service, "that sovereign resolved," says Wykes, "that so great a luminary should not lie buried, but be placed on high, as on a candlestick, to enlighten the church." In 1269 the body of the Confessor was removed, above 200 years after his decease, into the new shrine, the form and decorations of which we shall consider after we have described the other royal tombs.

The communication with Rome by our ecclesiastics was then extremely frequent; the more so, as every new abbot had upon his election to go to the papal seat for the confirmation of his appointment. At that period the system of mosaics, illustrated by Mr. Digby Wyatt in his exquisite work on Geometric Mosaic of the Middle Ages, was much in vogue. These styles are evidently of Byzantine origin; and specimens are to be found in the Capella Palatina at Palermo, in the Cathedral at Monreale, in the churches of St. Maria Maggiore, San Lorenzo, and Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Rome, of St. Mark at Venice, and in other parts of Italy; as also at Canterbury Cathedral, in the Sanctuary of A'Beckett.

The king and monks of Westminster were anxious to give peculiar and elaborate magnificence to this shrine, and consequently it was executed with glass mosaic decorations, the floor also with a geometric marble-mosaic pattern, and the tomb of the Royal Restorer, Henry III. shines with the like brilliant work. Another fine specimen of a different style, the marble tessellated work, is the magnificent pavement in front of the abbey altar, to which I shall hereafter revert.

Here, then, we have illustrations of a style of art of rare occurrence out of Italy; three out of the four are unnoticed even by the intelligent author of the work just alluded to. In Paris none such exist!

The cenotaph of Henry III. if met with in Italy, or the Holy Land, or Constantinople, would be quoted for its design and enrichments. From the pavement of the north aisle of the choir rises an elevated basement, on which

rests the lower division of the royal tomb. Its face has three-square compartments; the centre one was once filled in with a circular porphyry panel, circumscribed with interlacing bands of glass mosaic, and the apandrils occupied with smaller circles of the like work. The outer panels are square, placed losenge-wise, or serpentine, also enclosed in mosaic bands and with circular smaller panels in the apandrils. At the ends are pilasters with a twisted column at each angle. The upper compartment of the tomb, on which lies the bronze effigy of the king, has two spiral columns at the angles, the flutings filled up with glass mosaics. The centre forms one large panel with a noble slab of porphyry, surrounded by a border of glass mosaics, and held in its place by four bronze pins, the ornamental heads of which project beyond the face of the porphyry. The elevation towards the shrine is different in design, but presents, with some variation of detail, the like general divisions. Most of the slabs of precious marble are abstracted or split, the mosaics picked out, the columns deficient. The recumbent statue of the king, now covered with dirt and rust, is of brass—the first, according to Walpole, that was cast in this kingdom: it was once gilt, and probably parts of it enamelled; and the very plate on which he lies is covered (some) with the English device of the lion. But the canopy above the royal head is gone—the couchant animals gone—the side pillars or buttresses gone—the kingly staff and sceptre gone—and the wooden canopy above to keep off the dust is a bare fragment.

It appears that, after a troubled reign of fifty-two years, Henry III. died, at the age of sixty-six years, and was buried by the Knights Templars, of whose order his father was the founder, and with such splendour, that Wykes the monk says, he made a more magnificent figure when dead than he had ever done while living. Tranquil and pensive is the expression of the royal features, betokening other cares and other thoughts; and his spirit is now where wars and tumults exist not. But our shame, as Englishmen, is not the less, that we leave in such neglect so sacred a deposit of a venerable sovereign—so rare a monument of ancient taste.

In the intercolumnar space to the west of Henry III. lies his son Edward I. the English Justinian, who was, to use the words of the accurate Brayley, at the same time a gallant warrior, an able statesman, a wise legislator, in domestic life a faithful and affectionate husband to his excellent Queen Eleanor of Castile, and a good father to his children. His tomb is a large plain one, composed of five slabs of grey marble, without any pretensions to decoration, and as unostentatious as the beautiful memorials which he erected to his excellent queen are rich in all the embellishments of Gothic art. The tomb of his beloved Eleanor lies in the intercolumnar space, east of her father-in-law, Henry III. She it was who accompanied her warrior husband, Edward I. in all his journeys and expeditions, having in Palestine, as it is recorded, sucked the poison from the wound inflicted in his arm by the dagger of an assassin. She was his partner for six and thirty years, and died in 1290, seventeen years before her husband. He was then fifty-one, and so tenderly attached to the memory of her conjugal virtues and affection for him, that he ordered the erection of the celebrated crosses between Lincoln and London, some of which still remain at Edmonton, Waltham, Northampton, and Geddington, and the refinement and variety of whose design and execution are admirable. The last resting-place of this best of England's queens is no way inferior to the other memorials of her virtues; but the same melancholy story must be told of the tomb of the lovely Eleanor of Castile as of that of Henry III. The exquisite beauty of her features realise the Greek type of loveliness; and in fact, so sweet is the expression, so harmonious are the features, so perfect the profile, that it is said later sculptors adopted her likeness for their figures of the Virgin. And it is curious to remark, that although she must have died at an advanced age, above fifty, for she had been married six and thirty years, and had been the mother of

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